[A Community Man]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A COMMUNITY MAN

Date of First Writing January 30, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Mr. W. T. J. Lever (white)

Fictitious Name T. J. Oliver

Street Address Route #1

Place Blythewood, S. C.

Occupation Farmer

Name of Writer L. E. Cogburn

Name of Reviser State Office

Rounding the curves, pulling the hills, and crossing through woods and creeks, between the Monticello road and the home of T. J. Oliver, in the hills of the Big Cedar Creek section fifteen miles northwest of Columbia, brought to mind the old couplet, “Over the river and through the woods To Grandfather's house we go.”

It was the day before Christmas eve. As I pulled up into the front yard, explosive cracklings and poppings resounded from the field on the slant of the hill. Three men and several hogs were moving leisurely about the scene of explosives. One of the men, sighting me, started toward the house. [C. 10 S. C. Box,??]

2

It was Mr. Oliver himself, a bit stooped but of about average height and weight, his dark hair much streaked with gray. His brown eyes appraised as keenly until he was close enough for recognition and then they lighted with the greeting of a cordial handshake.

“This is the day set for my coming, if you've been too busy to remember,” I reminded him. “I hope it doesn't break into your plans.”

“Yes, I remember. There's nothing pushing to do until this afternoon, then I must go to Blythewood. Get out and come in.”

“Let's see what you're doing down in the field first. Are Arthur and Claude at home? Looks like them down there.”

“Yes, they're both at home, playing boys again with their pranks.”

With exchanges of Christmas greetings, I shook hands with them, Arthur first. He is the oldest son, near the middle thirties, and a little taller than his father, but has his father's dark hair, and his mother's blue eyes and light complexion. Claude, probably thirty, of average height but broad-shouldered and heavy, has dark hair, but his eyes are blue and complexion light.

“Family forms and features run pretty true to patterns,” I commented. “That indicates, I believe, a long line of blooded ancestry. Weren't you exploding something down here a few minutes ago?”

“Yes, we were chastising the hogs,” Claude explained. “They were eating the corn Papa put here for the turkeys. We blasted them with firecrackers. A bit of fun and right effective. They've yielded [ground?] and retreated down the hill.”

“Yes, they'll not come back right soon,” said Mr. Oliver. “Suppose we go to the house and get by the fire.”

3

The house, a large two-story, T-shaped frame structure, stands on the crest of a hill gently sloping for a half mile to the swamps of Big Cedar Creek. Large oak trees stand in front, on an abrupt slope extending fifty yards to a branch. A windmill, pumping water for the farm, stood in the back yard. A hundred yards to the rear is the stock lot, enclosed by a scraggly plank fence. Near its center stood the old barn and stables.

The home of the Olivers burned in January, 1936. All the family were absent. Mr. Oliver, returning from his work of terracing some neighborhood farm, came in sight of the house just in time to see the cloud of smoke burst into a sheet of flame. Nothing could be saved except a table or two. The new house, built by sections as time and funds have permitted, is not yet finished inside and the exterior not yet painted.

“We'll go in here,” Mr. Oliver said, turning to the rear of the building - the stem of the T. “Here's where we live mostly. I built these three rooms first, after we were burned out.”

Here in a room used for both living and dining room were Mrs. Oliver and Lillian, their daughter. Mrs. Oliver, her eyes blue, complexion light, and her figure of the stocky type, looked better preserved than her husband, though her hair was quite gray. Lillian, in the middle twenties, is a small, slender brunette, with dark hair and brown eyes like her father's.

“We'd just finished breakfast when you came,” Mrs. Oliver apologized,” and haven't finished cleaning the house. We were all up late last night and took our time about getting up this morning.”

“It isn't so late,” I replied. “I came early so as to catch Mr. Oliver at [home.?]”

“Sunrise is late for Mother,” Lillian said. “Papa, the fire is going to 4 need some wood before you got through with your life story. Arthur and Claude are going, to hunt holly and mistletoe. I'll have the Christmas cards finished by the time you've fixed the fire. Then you may have the room all to yourselves.”

Mrs. Oliver returned to the kitchen, and, while Mr. Oliver went for wood, I sat with Lillian, planning anew the course of the interview.

But it was Arthur that brought in the wood. Claude and Mr. Oliver, with a rabbit nestled on his breast, came in a little later.

“How did you catch it?” I asked.

“Claude caught him.”

“You don't mean he ran the rabbit down.”

“No, he caught him in a trap.”

“What are you going to do with him, Papa?” Lillian asked.

“Kill him.”

“Please don't kill the poor little thing. Turn him loose.”

“Yes, I am going to kill him. He has been eating my rutabagas, now I'm going to eat him. There is no better meat to eat. Here, Claude, take him out and dress him.”

Lillian, taking her cards from the table, said “You all use this table, and I'll go help Mama in the kitchen.”

Mr. Oliver, pushing the table nearer the fire, said, “I wonder what's the object of having these stories written.”

“The same question has come to my mind. You know this is being done all over the South. Stories given true pictures of the problems and struggles of Southern people may throw some light on Problem No. 1. But I think the purpose is more literary than social. Some of the best sellers contain just such 5 material as will be in these stories.

“If an account of my life can do any good, I will gladly give it. But where shall I begin? I was born and reared on this acre, part of the original grant from the King of England, handed down to us by our forefathers.”

“That's a fine start.”

In a pensive mood, he continued, “We are of French descent. The story goes that we descended from Isaac Oliver, Le Olivere. In 1685, during the regin of King Louis XIV of France, and Protestants were not only forbidden to worship God in their own way, but were forbidden to leave their country on penalty of death. Isaac stated that nearly all of his family had been put to death while trying to escape across the closely guarded boarders of Alsace-Lorraine, and that he, the only one of the family, with great hazard, barely escaped and went into Germany and lived for a short time. On hearing that William Penn, proprietor of the province of Pennsylvania, in North America, resided in London, he and a few of his friends went to London.

“In the party was a French woman, very attractive and resourceful. She made inquiries as to where Penn might be found. While the directions were being given, a coach came dashing down the street. She was told that the man in the coach was Penn going to his office. She, running toward the moving vehicle and addressing him in French, attracted his attention. The coach stopped. Not being able to speak English, it was fortunate for her that Penn had studied in Paris and could speak fluently in her native tongue. She gained an appointment, during which she unfolded the story of what they had recently gone through with in France. Penn gave her a letter of introduction to his agent. A grant of land in Pennsylvania was made to her. Issac, afterwards in Pennsylvania, married one of her daughters. My great-grandfather, 6 William Oliver, fought for the American cause in the Revolutionary War.

“As far as we know, all the Olivers in South Carolina are descendants of John and Sam Oliver, who were born and reared in Lexington County and moved to Richmond County after the War of 1812. My grandfather, John Oliver, fought in the War of 1812. He married Nancy Brown, daughter of William Brown, who is living on Big Cedar Creek, on land granted by the English King. He had five boys and four girls. My father, Jackson J. Oliver, one of the five boys, was born and reared on this original grant. On the day of Secession he married Susan Wessinger, who was of German descent. They had four boys and five girls. Two of my brothers and one sister have died. All of the surviving members, including myself, live on farms.

“My grandfather was an educated man. I had all of his old books in the house when it was burned. French books, German books, and all the other old books, a collection of ages, were burned. I would not have taken a thousand dollars for them.

“After the Civil War, my father built a log cabin here on the place. In it I went to school to a lady teacher until I was eight years of age. The room was heated by a big fireplace and had no glass windows. We did not have desks, but had to sit on slabs supported by wooden legs. Had no blackboards. Slates were used to cipher and write on. The more

advanced pupils used foolscap paper as copy books. The teacher would set the copy at the top of the page, and the pupil would copy line after line until the page was filled to the bottom. The recitation bench was up at the front near the fireplace, but we would always stand in line during the spelling recitation. If a word was missed, as often was the case, it would be passed on down and through the length of the line until some one spelled it. The 7 successful speller would advance near the head of the class.

“Sixty years ago, my father gave the land and the lumber, and the neighbors helped build a new schoolhouse. This was the Belleview High School. the first in Upper Richland County after the Civil War. We were proud of it. I have the old blackboard, made of [wide?] pine boards, in my barn now.

“Mr. [B. R.?] Turnipseed, Dr. B. Rhett Turnipseed's father, was our teacher. He was paid by the patrons of the school. I have never attended a public school; that is, one that is run by paying the expenses from the public treasury. The school term was eight months in the year. I had to walk five miles to this school. I attended school here four years and completed requirements for college entrance, which was equivalent to the tenth grade.

At twenty years of age, I applied for admission to Clemson College, the first year it was opened. I remembered, in sending my application, I wrote 'Poff. Clinkscale,' looked at it, and said, 'No, that's not right,' and I erased one of the f's. I was not accepted, turned down because of the limited capacity of the school. At the beginning of the nineties, the low price of cotton caused a shortage of money on the farms. My father could have paid my expenses at Clemson, but not at the more expensive colleges, as Wofford or the University of South Carolina.

“I wanted to go to college. Thinking I might get something to do at Leesville College, I tried there; but Dr. Koon, the president, told me he had nothing I could do. So I was not able to attend college.”

As further explanation, Mr. Oliver pulled forth a roll of Confederate money, from a box of souvenirs, fondling it, he handed it to me, saying, “This partly explains why I was not able to obtain a college education. This is 8 a part of $9,000 that was left on my daddy's hands after he had served four years in the Confederate Army. During those trying times following the Civil War, he did well to raise so large a family and give us the opportunities we had.

“Because of the cramped conditions on the farm in 1893, I tried city life. I worked as city deliveryman for the Southern Express Company in Columbia for two years, at thirty-five dollars a month. This was as skilled labor, ten to twelve hours a day. I worked all over the city, and knew it like a book.

“During these two years, I learned one thing thoroughly, and that was I did not like city life. I went to Florida to go in the citrous business with my uncle. I was there during the big freeze of 1895, which knocked the business out. While down there, I tried truck farming but did not find it profitable. I came back home on May 12, 1896. All these times, I never laid down my books. I read and studied everything I could find that I thought would be educative.

“In 1896, I stood the teacher's examination in Fairfield County and made grade A, 70. I taught two years in public schools, and then got married. And I've been taught ever since.”

He said this rather loudly, wishing to be overheard by his wife, who was busy in the kitchen, the adjoining room. And again, quite loudly, “I wonder if the ol' o'man heard what I said.” Turning to me, he whispered, “We are going to have some fun now.”

Appearing in the doorway, a dish and drying cloth in hand, Mrs. Oliver asked, “What is that you've been telling?”

“I was just relating a bit of history of my life. Sometimes I feel 9 that it might be called ancient history, yet I [know?] it is current. I said that I taught school two years and then got married and have been taught ever since.”

Smiling, yet apparently in earnest, she came back at him: “That's just the way with you men. You make us think we are having our own way, and, at that same time, you are leading us around by the nose. And the strange thing about it to me, and I guess amusing to him, is that I think I'm having my own way all the time.”

“Judging from the results of your efforts, these fine sons and daughters you have reared and educated, you must have had a mutual understanding at least on the more important questions,” I commented.

“I love to tease her,” resumed Mr. Oliver.

“On February 15, 1899, I married Annie Riley of Saluda County, near Chappells. I changed from school teaching to farming that year, and I've been farming ever since.

“Two sons and two daughters were born to us. I had promised myself if I ever had any children I would give each a college degree. Well, it was a hard struggle to keep up the standard of living on a two-horse farm, with the high price of labor and the low price of cotton, six and seven cents a pound, and the boys off at college. But each one was willing to help and did help with expenses by working. Claude had worked with the [canteen?] at Wofford. Winnifred had a dining room scholarship at Greenville Woman's College, and Lillian, after her sophomore year, at the Columbia College, assisted in teaching.

“All have college degrees now, and I believe are doing well. Lillian is teaching home economics in the high school at Great Falls, and Claude 10 is teaching manual training in the high school at Chester. Winnifred married a farmer and lives near us. Arthur is a member of the South Carolina Methodist Conference. During his four years as pastor of the Chandler Memorial Church in Columbia, he did all the work, except writing the thesis

for his M.A. at the University of South Carolina. He is now on leave of absence from the conference and is studying for his Ph. D. at Duke University.

“In 1909, seeing the need of improvement in our farm work, I took a correspondence course in soils and agriculture with Clemson College. About that time, farm demonstration work was being started in this county, and I was appointed as assistant farm demonstrator of Richland County. I continued in this work until 1922. At the same time, I was running my farm at home. My work being throughout the county, I used a horse and buggy for transportation until 1916, when I bought a Model-T Ford. But because of bad roads, I had to leave it in the garage a great part of the time and drive my horse and buggy. During this time, I finished all short courses offered, at Clemson, to agricultural workers as preparation for their work.

“Since the coming of the boll weevil, cotton farming has been altogether unprofitable. In this section, cotton is supplemented by poultry and livestock.

“Since 1935, I have been employed as emergency agricultural teacher. My work is this has been soil conservation, such as checking old terraces and surveying lines for new ones. I try to impress on the farmers that to keep the fire in fireplaces and stoves is still the first principle in soil conservation.

“At present, I am [teacher?] in the Workers' Educations in Cedar Creek 11 Community.” Handing me a bulletin, “This will show you something of the nature of the work.”

Glancing through it, I saw lesson plans, research questions, and so forth.

“You will notice at the end that the name of Doctor William Jones, of Clemson, is along with mine, as one of the authors. All he did was to copy three paragraphs from another bulletin; the rest is my work.

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“My farm work is done by a darkey that I've had here on the place for sixteen years. I pay him a dollar a day. If it wasn't that he has been with me so long, I wouldn't give him that much. This year we made only three bales of cotton, but enough corn and forage for use on the place.

“In short, I have spent most of my life for others. I have lived to help other people. In church and in the schools of the county, I have done all I could to advance church work and education by cooperating with others. Whether with or without compensation, I work right on. I have been trustee of the public school of the district for half of my life. Have served as steward of the church, secretary of the farmers' union, chaplain of the grange, and president and director of the local farm association.

“I have never been in a legal dispute, arrested or persecuted for any offense. I won't say I haven't been persecuted.

“I prefer hard struggles in my home community to city life.

“I am a one hundred percent democrat - woof, warp, and filling.

“I enjoy community recreation and country picnics. At socials, I am first on the floor for folk dance.

“You should see our community recreation hall. The neighborhood contributed $700, and the W.P.A. labor did the work. We are going to build a 12 storage house next week for the community hall.

“The burning of our home hit us very heavy. The $400 insurance didn't go far towards rebuilding. Besides, we lost everything in it. All my library and records, books I had collected from boyhood up.

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“My children are helping me build it back. Each is building a room for himself as a home. We do the work as we can. Claude and Arthur work faithfully on it during their vacations. Though three years have passed, and it's not completed, we hope to have the best that can be found in these hard hills.

“Let me show you what we have so far.”

The three rooms that were built soon after the old home was burned, and are now being used as a living room, kitchen, and bedroom, join the main building to one side and about the center. The living room is heated by an open fireplace and is furnished by a big round center table and chairs. On the wall near the door was a telephone. By the side of the fireplace were several shelves filled with books.

From here we went out into a screened side porch and entered the kitchen, adjoining to the right. This was well lighted by three windows. A new range was on one side, a sink under a window, and an enameled metal cook table in one corner.

“If you have never had you house burned, you don't know what a struggle it is to have to build, and buy furniture for the household. But we have never lost faith, and we are beginning to see the light that leads out. Now I will show you through the main building.”

We entered a hallway some eight feet wide and extending back to the chimney. From here a stairway led up to the second floor. While we were 13 going up the steps, we stopped and looked down at the chimney. Mr. Oliver remarked: “I don't suppose you have ever seen a chimney like that before. I haven't either. There are about 8,000 brick in it. The base is seven by eight feet, extending, as you see, to the ceiling of this hallway. In order to have fireplaces in rooms on both sides of the hallway we had to make it the width of the hall. This arrangement also makes space for the stairway.”

Mr. Oliver took the lead as we continued up the stairway into the hallway which extends across the width of the building.

“This is Lillian's room. All, you will notice, are not completely furnished. We have to crawl before we can walk,” explained Mr. Oliver.

This room was ceiled, walls and overhead, as are the others on the second floor. The natural color of the yellow pine is brought out by a coating of shellac. The four large windows were tastefully curtained with light cretonne. The improvised washstand of apple boxes and draped with same material as curtains, was very convenient and attractive. The bed was of white enameled iron, with white counterpane orderly spread.

Going to the next room on the same side of the hall, Mr. Oliver said: “In here is the old maid's quarters. (Meaning Arthur, who has never married.) This is where he sleeps, and there, across the hall, is his study.”

In the bedroom where an old walnut bed, which was used by his grandfather, and a trunk. The study was a well lighted room of some ten by twenty feet with white painted walls. Here were books galore; some were arranged in shelves and many stacked in piles on the floor. By the window were a typewriter, chair, and table.

Going back into the hall and down to the opposite end, we entered Claude's room. This was some larger than the others, about eighteen by sixteen 14 feet, and furnished with an iron bed, small oak table and two straight split bottom chairs.

Retracing our steps downstairs, Mr. Oliver stopped at the foot of the stairway and, pointing to the left, said, “This will be the bathroom, when we get the fixtures put in and the water cut on.” Going directly across the hall, we entered the living room, about fifteen by thirty feet in dimensions and not yet finished.

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“This will be the dance hall,” said Mr. Oliver.” And pointing to the present living quarters, “That is the 'sylum.”

Arthur, who had joined us, explained: “He means the asylum, hospital for the insane. He likes to have his fun.”

We passed through a narrow hallway separated from the stairway hall by the double chimney and entered another room.

“This,” said Mr. Oliver, is his humorous way, “will be the most expensive room in the house; that is after we begin to use it. It is to be the dining room. Here to our right is the fireplace I referred to a while ago. The flue goes into the big chimney. We hope to do this next summer when the boys are here on their vacations.

“As soon as we are able, we expect to have the house wired for lights. After three years of hard work trying to get the rural electric line extended into our community, we hope now in a short time to begin the construction. I am going to Blythewood this afternoon to see if the material has come.”